



**CHRISTINE HOOVER**



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*To my brothers and sisters  
of Charlottesville Community Church*



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## ONE

# broken hearts

*Grieved and starved.*

That's how my husband, Kyle, described our current state.

We'd been tracing the back roads on a scenic loop we take when we need to be together for a few moments without the kids. Rain splashed gray against the car's windshield, mirroring the dejection we'd been laboring to diagnose in ourselves.

His words found their landing, and I knew them as true so deep inside that I instinctively doubled over into a wailing sob. My hands flew to my face, seeking to muffle the sound, as if by doing so I might stuff the emotions back inside or somehow hide they were there at all.

*Grieved and starved.*

Grieved, because after ten years of church planting, shepherding, cultivating deep relationships, and creating spaces for others to develop community among themselves, many of our closest friends had moved away, and we felt alone.

Starved, because we didn't merely feel alone; we also felt needy. We hungered and thirsted for even a crumb of encouragement or a

caring gesture, or perhaps a break from the needs of others in order to experience renewal ourselves.

I'd felt the clouds hanging over me for weeks, as had my husband, and for both of us to be discouraged at the same time was unusual. The depth to which I'd felt it was also unusual, and I'd waited and prayed for the clouds to pass—but, as was made apparent by my uncontainable emotional outburst, I still hadn't been able to fully admit the extent of my pain or how scared I felt, knowing my typically stalwart husband was hurting as well.

I didn't want to admit the extent of my pain, because like most people I want to avoid sadness at all costs. But there was something else—something sinister—laced in the sadness, and I'd known its presence all along.

Bitterness and rage were fueling me.

I'd tucked this truth in tight, hiding what I didn't want to name and certainly didn't want others to see. I'd called it more acceptable terms, like *weariness* and *uncertainty*, which gave me permission to retreat from others, hoping even as I retreated that they might notice and laud the amount of service and ministry that had led me to such a point. These terms not only permitted my retreat from people but also permitted my retreat far from the conviction of God.

I convinced myself my primary problem was that I was not setting good boundaries, managing my time well, or saying no often enough. I'd worn myself down doing good, so perhaps I simply needed rest and an appreciative pat on the back. According to my own calculations, I'd done enough to last a long while. And so I set about looking for ways to hoard more of my energy, skills, and time for what mattered most to me. In the name of Jesus, of course.

Yet there, on the winding road, rain pounding on the glass, I cried over my hungry heart.

It became instantly clear that no amount of scheduling, control, rest, or service had fed me, because my sole motivation—this



sinister, subterranean craving—had been a grasping—a yearning—for love from people. I'd set my heart on accolades and performed like a circus animal, expecting the ovation at the conclusion of the show.

My heart, clearly, was misaligned. I was working against the way and work of God in my own life, because my heart had become distorted in its search for self-glory.

Just a few minutes prior, I'd said to Kyle, "I feel like a vending machine that requires no payment. Everyone comes and pushes buttons without putting money in, and I have to respond according to their demands." I'd said this with disdain for those expecting goods and services from me, not realizing how this analogy laid my own soul bare. *Have to respond*. Those were the incriminating words, as if to *not* respond in the way others wanted wasn't even an option.

And in my line of thinking it wasn't, because I wanted to be loved.

I couldn't disappoint because I wanted to be loved.

I served because I wanted to be loved.

Though I resented everyone lined up at my vending machine, I also, in my distortion, "needed" them. I needed them to see what I did for them so they might admire and stroke me. I needed them to feed my starving soul. I felt entitled to their love, sure they should honor me in the specific ways I secretly held as firm and unrealistic expectations.

And they hadn't given me my craving, so I'd raged quietly inside, cherishing my bitterness.

I'd been looking for a way to blame others or even God himself for my "weariness" and "uncertainty," but the accusing finger only pointed back at me.

Grieved and starved, yes, but ultimately it'd been by my own hand.

At the core of my heart was an allegiance to love, but because it was an allegiance to the imperfect and incomplete love of people

rather than the perfect and complete love of God, my life had become tinged with fear. Fear drove me from bed every morning and worked me into exhaustion. Fear used me up, muddied my relationships, confused my thinking, and nursed my bitterness. Fear wondered aloud if I could ever be loved for who I was rather than what I did for others, and fear made me restless in my own skin. My allegiance to the love of others broke my heart of its ability to contain and experience joy.

*I had become confused about the kingdom of God.*

## **Our Hearts Are Made for Allegiance**

In our evangelical Christian culture today, we've not simply become confused about the kingdom of God; we've mostly forgotten the concept or shoved it aside completely. We have little foundational understanding of the very thing Jesus talked about more than any other when he walked this earth, and it's showing. It's showing in the blurred lines we've allowed between earthly kingdoms and God's kingdom. It's showing in how we date, marry, parent, age, and face death. It's showing in how we define ourselves and various "other" groups of people. It's showing in our individual pursuits at the expense of others, even within the confines of our churches. It's showing through what we're ambitious for and what we admire most. We're a confused people, saying we desire to live according to the kingdom of God, expressing a desire to participate in "kingdom work," but not understanding at all what it means to do so, aside from sprinkling Jesus in somewhere along the way.

The kingdom of God is ultimately about allegiance. Jesus described it as being like a seed, invisible to the eye, implanted and sprouting in the hearts of those who have pledged their lives to him.

And so, in order to understand and orient ourselves toward the kingdom of God, we must look at the heart. If our hearts are divided according to contradictory allegiances, we cannot and will not

experience the joy and life Jesus promised us. Instead, we experience confusion, anxiety, isolation, and the painful consequences of the actions we take in allegiance to false kings.

We become grieved and starved.

So we will, in these pages, ask God to search our hearts, show us our allegiances, and restore what we've divided or kept from him.

We must first know that our hearts are *created* for allegiance. They are also designed to crave full satisfaction, and so we naturally give our allegiance to what we believe will meet our craving for that fullness—what we often call peace and joy. In other words, the form and function of our lives fall in line behind our heart's greatest allegiance. We act according to what we love and value most. We *give ourselves over* to what we love and value most.

For those of us who are in Christ, we've at some point come to the repentant realization that our heart is broken at its very core, because it came to us straight from Adam, factory-set on *self*, and therefore we are in and of ourselves irretrievably distorted in mind, body, and soul. If our own heart is our compass, we don't know what's good, beautiful, and worthy of our allegiance. We only know what our heart wants and follow where our heart takes us—and we've come to realize we've followed our own desires straight into the grave. We cannot make our heart beat, alive and healed. We cannot straighten our crooked desires. This recognition had us desperately seeking outside help, and God came. He offered our heart rescue from its sinful state through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, and thus we were healed by falling in faith onto him. Our heart was made alive, and it awakened to knowledge of true worthiness: Jesus the King is worthy of *all* allegiance.

If you have not yet decided to give your life and heart to Jesus by faith, you certainly have already experienced a craving for more, for fullness and a sense of purpose and joy in life. The Bible says these things are found in surrendering yourself to Jesus Christ. He invites

you to bring your broken heart—broken by your own sin—and to confess your need for his healing and rule. In doing so, he gives you his forgiveness and his rightness with God the Father. He promises to accept all who come to him, believing. And he promises to love you forever. He is worthy of your full allegiance, and you'll find a satisfying life in no one and nothing else.



At whatever point we come to Jesus, the seed of the kingdom of God is implanted in us, and our transformation to wholeheartedness begins.

So does the war.

Because we remain in the body, while the *power* of sin is nullified in our lives, the *pull* of sin remains. Every Christian continually forgets where life is found, what is true, and where this world is headed, so our battle is to keep our allegiance directed toward Christ alone. Our mind requires renewing (Rom. 12:2), our flesh picks fights against the Spirit (Gal. 5:17) working in us, and our heart is like dough with the gospel as its yeast—it must be kneaded and worked through every part.

We need to be aware that the war we're in is not a cultural war or a political war. The war we're in is a *kingdom* war, and the battles are happening every day in our mind and heart. Whether it's a mundane day or a moment of crisis, in whatever we face, we either set our heart's allegiance on who we are, what we want, and what we can do (or what we want others to do for us), or we set it on who God is, what God wants for us, and what he has done and can do. We choose to exalt and worship ourselves, or we choose the King and his kingdom. It's either a broken cistern that leaks water (Jer. 2:13) or a fountain of living waters that never runs dry (John 7:37–39).

This is the war we find ourselves in, and the prize is our allegiance.

When the Bible speaks about our flesh, it speaks not of our physical skin but rather our orientation toward ourselves—to please our-

selves and depend on ourselves. To speak of “the flesh” is to speak of *self*.

Self is a category holding a thousand beckoning options, and we each have our own pet self-focused allegiances we attempt to crown as king. Self as king makes life complicated and complex, because self as king makes demands and offers promises of glory but gives only misery and death. Self as king turns us in on ourselves, distorting truth, making each of us our own level, by which we hang everything according to our desires.

Some of us give our heart’s allegiance to security. We believe money will give us that sense of security and alleviate our anxiety about the future, and so we orient our life around gaining and maintaining financial peace. We guide our children toward lucrative career options, and we believe the future is only as promising as the dollar amount in our retirement savings. We build a kingdom where money is king, not considering (or choosing not to believe) the instability and insecurity this king truly gives.

Some of us give our heart’s allegiance to control. We have carefully crafted dreams and desired outcomes, both for ourselves and for those we love, and our deepest held belief is that we’re completely capable of creating and molding our lives according to our self-made agenda. A rotating list of bestselling books are built upon this premise, promising we can be the lucky few who escape suffering or unexpected blows if we work hard enough. So we build a kingdom where “the good life” is king.

And some of you resonate with me. We are those who have a heart bowed down before the approval of others, willing to do whatever is needed to be knighted with belonging, acceptance, and love. We give our best energy toward building a kingdom where self-significance is king.

We’re created for allegiance and formed as receptors ready to be filled up to full, but we so often gorge ourselves on what cannot actually fill us. If success and power are supreme, there is always

more to grab. If image is of utmost importance, we must keep pace. If our appetite is king, we must have more, more, more. We go back again and again, trying to find a satisfying feast in tasteless rubbish. We beg the gift to be the Giver, a drop of water to be our ocean, the world to be our heaven. The Bible describes this pursuit as an attempt to grasp the wind (Eccles. 1:14). It's utter futility.

And yet we go back, again and again.

How do we find our way out of this cycle?

## **Bow Anew**

As Kyle and I drove on the winding loop, and as I sobbed into my hands, I began to work backward, sifting through my emotions, following the trails of thought stemming from these emotions, and diving deep into the wells of my heart, asking above all that God would help me make sense of me. I felt bare before him, willing for the first time in months for him to thoroughly examine and test me.

We're often taught to be wary of our emotions, and I agree it's necessary to be wary of *expressing* our emotions however we want or *following* our emotions wherever they lead, but I do believe God's given us our emotions as signals that we need to examine further. In other words, emotions are often invitations to consider what is happening within our hearts, *specifically to whom or what we're bowing our hearts in allegiance.*

Tears may flow in lament and trust before God, but they also may flow because we desperately crave what we believe others are withholding from us that we think will fulfill us. We can know the difference when we consider whether or not we'd describe what we're experiencing as *life* or *death.*

This has become an important litmus test for me in reorienting my emotions around truth.

Am I sinking in feelings of condemnation, rivalry, frustration, shame, regret, hatred, or anger? These only stem from the roots of

self-trust and self-glory, and the rotten fruit they produce is eventual death. This rotten fruit *feels* like death in us, because it is. If I examine what lurks beneath these types of feelings, I find a heart bowing toward self.

On the other hand, if I'm experiencing feelings of peace or hopefulness, as if my heart is settled despite the circumstances swirling around me, I am experiencing the full life that can only be given and cultivated in me by the Holy Spirit. These are fruits producing further fruit, and it feels like being fully alive, because it is. If I examine what lies beneath these types of feelings, I find a heart bowing in trust toward God.

My emotions that day on the winding road clearly showed rotten fruit.

In the preceding days, I'd been reading through the book of Matthew, my eyes landing constantly on Jesus's description of the kingdom of God, and I thought of it now in light of being grieved and starved. I thought about how, again and again, he contrasted two ways of life: either we live according to the kingdom of earth or we enter into the kingdom of God. *One is death, and the other life.*

The kingdom of earth and its many reigning false kings make promises they don't keep. It's not that they choose not to keep them; it's that they can't keep them. The kingdom of earth, reigned over by the lusts of the eyes and flesh, can only and always give death and decay.

The kingdom of God, however, promises life and gives it in ways that far surpass our hopes, desires, needs, and expectations.

*One is death, and the other life.*

This was how I knew I'd become confused again about the kingdom of God.

I was grieved and starved, because I'd been looking for life among orchards of death.



We tend to make the Christian life so complicated.

We make it about behaviors and spiritual disciplines and worldview and voting and social justice, and all of these are well and good in their proper place, but what the Christian life really comes down to is *allegiance*. In the daily grind of life or the difficult circumstances we face, do we bow to King Jesus or do we bow to self? In our singleness, our marriage, our vocation, or our parenting, do we bow to King Jesus or do we bow to self? In the privacy of our home or our work in the community, do we bow to King Jesus or do we bow to self?

There is only one King worthy of our heart's allegiance: Christ Jesus.

All other claims to the throne are bogus. They'll certainly promise, but they will not deliver. *There are no exceptions to this truth.*

So when we struggle to find peace or joy, when we feel restless or unsettled, when we succumb to the same old temptations, or when we seek escape or control, what we're really feeling are the effects of self-allegiance.

We prefer to label it something else, to keep things on the surface, at the level of behavior modification.

Most of us respond as I did when I was "weary" and "discouraged": we think we need new direction, that there is some answer out there waiting to be discovered. If we just knew what God wanted us to do, we'd move into the green pastures of God's peace. If we just got more organized or said the right yes and the right no at the right time, self-sufficiency would win us some measure of joy. If we were just a little better at self-control or self-discipline, we'd finally "arrive" spiritually and be done with these feelings of failure for good. If we just had the right relationships, we'd feel accepted and wanted.

Do you see where this sets our heart? On self. On standards and priorities set by self. On the agenda of self. On the desires of self. On the power and productivity of self, as if God is a bystander, looking on and hoping we get it right this time.



Self-allegiance is incredibly subtle and also incredibly dangerous, because it traps us in a cyclical pursuit where we are both the petitioner and the answer to our own prayers. We like to think outside influences are mostly to blame for our difficulties, but in reality self is *the* greatest threat to the life and peace we want for ourselves and others, because self asks us to double down when the foundation beneath us begins to crumble. And so often we do, not realizing our false allegiance.

Recently my husband and I were talking about our marriage. I asked him how I could be a better wife to him and to please tell me if I did anything that consistently annoyed him.

He said, “I don’t like your relationship with Instagram. Occasionally you fall into these slumps after scrolling through and comparing yourself to other writers, and it really affects you. You talk to me about it, which is fine, but we’re having the same conversation over and over again. Do you realize that?”

I hadn’t realized that, and it was sort of painful to hear.

I had a choice then. I could quit Instagram forever and always. I could turn my smartphone in for a flip phone. I could vow to never compare myself with another writer again. These were my initial thoughts, because I’d much prefer to rearrange the symptoms than repent of systemic heart issues. Instead, because I’d been thinking so much about the kingdom of God, I thought about what this consistent behavior revealed about my heart. I sat in the discomfort of allowing God to examine my heart’s allegiance. It was, of course, to myself and my own desires and glory. I wanted the opportunities *those* writers had. I wanted the numbers of people following me to tick up and up and up. I wanted a feeling of having reached the top, wherever the top was. *Broken cistern, give me a drink. Fill me to the full.*

I looked again at King Jesus, sovereign and good, acknowledged in prayer the ridiculousness of my obsession, repented of my self-allegiance, and bowed my heart to him once again.

This is kingdom work.

## King Jesus

The simple act of bowing anew to King Jesus will change us in a thousand ways, and all those ways are avenues of coming more alive, the seed of the kingdom sprouting and bearing fruit in our lives.

Bowing anew is the ongoing work of the Christian in which we continually bring the previously hidden (to us) parts of our lives, freshly uncovered by the Holy Spirit, under the rule and reign of King Jesus.

Bowing anew is what this book is about.

We'll start with the King, because the kingdom of God is ultimately about the rule and reign of Jesus in every heart. We'll discover the kingdom he's building among those with bowed hearts—its culture, ways, and demands. We'll define kingdom work as joining with God to bring all things, including our own hearts, under the rule and reign of Christ. Because our hearts are set on “self,” we cannot trust our natural inclinations and allegiances, so together we'll name these false allegiances in order to reject and resist them. We'll not only confess our broken-down allegiances and our inability to heal ourselves but also the lies we believe about God that fuel our misaligned worship.

My goal in writing isn't that we might, in shame, modify our behavior but rather to point out how we attempt to justify ourselves, prove ourselves, provide for ourselves, and secure ourselves apart from Christ. I'm going to call us out to a greater kingdom than what we can currently see—the kingdom of God is in fact here!—and to a greater King than any we might set up for ourselves.

As we begin to name our mute and impotent allegiances, we'll turn our gaze to Jesus, and find in him our heart's true King. He not only rules with all power, all authority, and all goodness but he's gone first in showing us how to live as embodied humans walking this earth with a heart submitted to the authority of God. He's told us who he is and what his kingdom is like, so we'll lean in to him in order to listen and obey.

Finally, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we'll rearrange and reorient in the ways necessary for our lives to reflect our allegiance to King Jesus. We'll do so, trusting that, as the wind and waves fell under Jesus's command, our craving for lesser allegiances will quiet and wither away, and over time he'll make us joyfully wholehearted.

We often live our days without thinking about why we do what we do and if these practices display allegiance to Jesus. Sometimes we focus on disciplines or behaviors instead of cutting to the root of what motivates and drives us. My goal is to guide you as you consider your heart first and foremost, allowing God to examine you and reveal himself to you in areas you prefer to keep hidden. When you worship rightly, you become aligned under the rule and reign of Jesus, you discover the blessedness of being his, and your desires to love and serve him grow. In other words, you will act according to your greatest love.

This is kingdom work.

Bowing to King Jesus may pain our flesh, but it rights our worship and heals our broken hearts with life, peace, and purpose.

Grieved and starved no more.

THE **hard work**  
OF **heart work**

1. What is your biggest concern or need right now?
2. What emotions is this concern or need stirring in you?  
What do these emotions indicate about where your allegiance lies?

a king and a kingdom

3. How would you define *allegiance*?
4. If a friend shared this same concern or need with you, what would you suggest to him or her about what it would look like to bow to Jesus in this situation?
5. For further reading: Deuteronomy 30:15–20, John 6:25–40, John 10:10, and Galatians 5:19–25.